

A Cooperative Approach of Farmer and Chef to Create a Profitable Niche Market for the Small Farm That Would Increase the Variety and Use of Specialty Potatoes

Location of Project: Wooster, Ohio (North Central Region)

Purpose:

The objective of this project was threefold:

- to increase the number of potato varieties grown and available to the consumer in Ohio;
- to give economic incentive and support to local direct marketing; and
- to provide specific educational information to consumers about how to best use each specific potato variety.

Accomplishments:

Seventeen varieties of specialty and gourmet potatoes were grown for 2 years at Muddy Fork Farm on an experimental basis. The field was prepared by tilling cover crops with a tractor and equipment belonging to Muddy Fork Farm. Project organizers from Muddy Fork Farm were responsible for preparing initial production plans and purchasing seeds and supplies, while the planting, weeding, picking of insects, and harvesting were done

manually with hoes and shovels by farmers from Muddy Fork Farm and other local producers.

The potatoes were marketed directly to consumers through the North Union Farmers Market at Shaker Square in Cleveland and through area restaurants. Several local newspapers publicized the project. Information about specialty potatoes and recipes were distributed to consumers at the farmers market and Parker's restaurant. During 2000 over 1,173 pounds of specialty potatoes were harvested and sold at \$2.00 per pound for total sales of approximately \$2,350, while during 2001, approximately 849 pounds of potatoes were sold at the North Union Market and area restaurants at \$2.00 per pound, for total sales of approximately \$1,700.

Lessons Learned: **Production lessons.** All the varieties grew well, although yields were well below average in 2001 because of damage to foliage and slow growth caused by unfavorable weather conditions. With more normal yields and somewhat larger-scale production (i.e., 10 acres rather than one acre), the project managers believed that specialty potato production could generally be a profitable operation for small farmers. The cost of the seed potatoes in 2000 and 2001 were between \$500 and \$600, and the cost of labor,

based on the 70 hours spent to plant, weed, water, and hand harvest the crop at \$10 per hour equaled approximately \$700. By adding the \$700 devoted to labor costs, plus the cost of the seed potatoes, total production costs ranged between \$1,200 and \$1,300 over the 2 year period. Taking into consideration these costs, plus \$100 for marketing expenses, the producers made a profit of \$950 in 2000 and \$300 in 2001, which they believed was relatively good considering that the crop only yielded half of its potential in 2001.

According to the market managers, one of the advantages to smaller producers of the specialty potato market is that the consumer market is too small to be attractive to large-scale agricultural competitors. Therefore, smaller producers have more of an opportunity to carve out a profitable market niche.

Marketing lessons. The producers found that targeting the right kind of consumers was critical in enabling them to obtain the premium prices for specialty potatoes. It was their impression that the customers who were comfortable paying such a price were generally well-educated, relatively affluent, and interested in gourmet foods. To be most effective in marketing specialty potatoes, the producers found that customers must be approached directly and provided with ideas and recipes for potatoes.

Fingerling potatoes stood out as a variety sought after by gourmet consumers. The purple viking variety was popular for its large tubers and good mashing quality, while the red gold variety was appreciated for its taste. The all-blue and all-red varieties were tried by consumers for their novelty value. Special recipes were developed for each type of potato, which were designed to showcase each potato variety's unique qualities.

Conclusion:

The acceptance of the new varieties was widespread once consumers tried specialty potatoes, and many of them repeated their purchases. The circulation of educational information and recipes added value to the product and resulted in a very loyal and knowledgeable customer. Growing specialty potatoes may be a good choice for the small farmer, who has proper equipment, good soil to work with, and direct access to his/her customers. To increase the scale of potato production, a mechanical harvester would make the job much easier, although hand harvesting could be an alternative option. The demand for specialty potatoes and the profit potential appears to be good.